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Turkish interventions in its near abroad: The case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The primary objective of Turkey's recent interventions in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is to cut the Gordian knot of its own Kurdish question by engaging the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliates militarily until they no longer control any territory. To this end, it is essential that Ankara maintains Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – and especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – as a junior and compliant partner. A secondary Turkish objective is to balance Iran's influence in Iraq's disputed territories, mainly by acting as protector of Turkmen and Sunni groups. In the background, the Turkish Justice and Development Party's (AKP) desire to maintain regime stability at home plays an important role since its alliance with the ultranationalist-conservative Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and some of its domestic legitimacy depends on the success of Turkish interventions into the KRI. Such interventions have historical precedent, but their scope and scale have increased significantly since 2018, with the effect that Ankara has been able to force the PKK into a defensive position. This has been achieved at the cost of the KDP's popular legitimacy, an increase in PKK popularity and significant collateral damage among ordinary Iraqi (Kurdish) citizens. Further intensification of Turkish interventions into Sinjar, the Nineveh Plains or Sulaymaniyah will lead to greater tensions with both Baghdad and Iran. An extension of UNAMI's security sector reform work to include border control can help prevent further conflict escalation by inserting a more neutral actor into this volatile situation.

1 Introduction

In April 2021, Turkey's Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soylu revealed Turkish plans to set up another base in the Metina region of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).¹ This will continue the trend of dozens of Turkish military bases having been

established in the KRI since mid-2018. Some are situated as far as 40 km away from the Turkish-Iraqi border. All bases serve to carry Turkey's fight with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) into Iraq, where the group's headquarters are based in the Qandil

¹ Süleyman Soylu: Metina bölgesine üs kuracağız, *Duvar*, 30 April 2021, [online](#) (accessed 21 June 2021).

mountain range.² Soylu's announcement was followed by a visit from Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar to one of Turkey's more technologically advanced bases in Iraq, without notification to either Erbil or Baghdad. The significant role of border protection units in Ankara's network of bases in Iraq also illustrates Turkey's understanding of where the new frontier lies (see Box 1 below).³ It appears that Ankara has created a permanent buffer zone in Iraq, akin to Afrin or the northern Aleppo countryside in Syria, as part of a broader plan to insulate Turkish territory from the PKK and its affiliates.⁴

What is certain is that Turkey's traditional strategy of chasing PKK fighters from Turkey back into Iraq and pursuing them briefly across the border has been replaced by a more sustained strategy of constant strikes against the PKK far into Iraqi territory that are carried out by special forces from Turkish-occupied Iraqi territory, as well as by drones and aircraft based in Turkey. What is also certain is that this strategy is being carried out with the tacit agreement of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) that controls the western part of the KRI. Ankara's incursions have barely registered protests from Baghdad, despite the blatant manner in which they violate Iraq's territorial sovereignty. Turkey's relentless strikes against the PKK deep inside KRI territory have meanwhile both weakened the PKK and negatively influenced the lives of

many ordinary Iraqi citizens, mostly Kurds. As Turkish strikes intensify in areas like Sinjar and Sulaymaniyah, which are further away from the border, these effects are amplified and lead to growing concern in the US, Iran and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) alike.⁵

It is with these developments in mind that this brief examines the strategic rationale, methods and impact of Turkish interventions in the KRI between 2018 and 2021 from different perspectives. The brief is intended for Europe's foreign affairs communities, including senior decision makers, desk officers and diplomatic staff in Iran, Turkey and Iraq. Its recommendations focus on the question of how the EU can help prevent the Turkish-PKK conflict in the KRI from growing and spilling over into adjacent areas. The brief is part of a larger research project that examines Turkish interventions in its neighbourhood to develop evidence-based and bottom-up conclusions on Turkish foreign/military policy.⁶

2 Strategic rationales: Turkey and the Kurdistan Democratic Party

Turkish policy towards the KRI has gone through different periods demarcated by clear political shifts. During the 1980s and 1990s, Ankara pursued a security-focused foreign policy predominantly shaped by the Turkish military. Under this policy, Ankara carried out cross-border hot-pursuit operations and also engaged informally with Iraqi Kurdish parties. It did not publicly recognise these parties as

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- 2 Marcus, Aliza, *Blood and Belief, The PKK and Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York: NYUP, 2007. In this brief, the term 'PKK' serves as a shortcut reference to the larger PKK-centred universe of Kurdish political and militant organisations with which command and control relations exist, such as the People's Defence Forces (HPG) and Civil Defence Units (YPS). In addition, there are organisations that are linked to the PKK but not necessarily fully controlled by it, such as the People's Defence Units (YPG) in Syria and the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) in Iraq.
 - 3 Bakan Akar Irak'ın kuzeyindeki üs bölgesini ilk kez ziyaret etti, *TRT Haber*, 2 May 2021, [online](#) (accessed 21 June 2021).
 - 4 Van Veen, E., Yüksel, E. and Tekineş, H., *Waiting for blowback: The Kurdish question and Turkey's new regional militarism*, The Hague, Clingendael, September 2020.

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- 5 For example: US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Twitter, 5 June 2021, [online](#) (accessed 23 June 2021).
 - 6 We would like to thank Dr Arzu Yılmaz (University of Hamburg) for her review of the brief. Its contents naturally remain our own responsibility. Preceding case studies on Libya and Syria (Idlib) can be found here: Yüksel, E., *Turkey's interventions in its near abroad: The case of Libya*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2021; Van Veen, E., *Turkey's interventions in its near abroad: The case of Idlib*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2021.

Box 1 On the nature and capability of Turkish military bases in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Turkish military bases in the KRI differ considerably in size and operational capacity. Generally speaking, bases constructed before 2018 (about 10) possess substantial capacities in terms of classic ground force projection, including self-sufficient battalion-level mechanised, infantry and/or special forces units (e.g. in the Bamerni, Bashiqa and Qanimasi areas).

Bases constructed after 2018 are better characterised as relatively small forward observation posts, usually built on sites of former PKK positions. There are dozens of such forward observation posts and they tend to be located higher in the mountains to obstruct PKK movement. They are usually equipped with light artillery, modern SARP electronic warfare, ACAR radar, SAHIN GÖZ observation and fire control systems, and defended by Turkish border units (about 100 per base), as well as small infantry units.

These forward observation posts are operationally attached to an intermediate layer of about three new medium-sized bases (also post-2018), such as those in Metina and Koc Tepe (Hakurk). These bases feature larger troop, logistical and intelligence capabilities. They are capable of organising troop deployments and reinforcements, conduct command operations, and provide logistics and fire support for forward observation posts. Medium-sized base capabilities include active defence systems, various mechanised and armoured units, and self-propelled Firtina howitzers.

The overall picture that emerges is of a three-layered system of bases that provides a measure of networked territorial control. Large troop deployments sit in the rear distributed over roughly a dozen bases, ready to provide backup or participate in larger operations. Next, a few substantially capable medium-sized bases support dozens of relatively high-tech forward observation posts that serve as eyes and ears to guide deployments from medium and large bases situated in the middle- and rear-echelons.

Sources: Kuzey Irak'ta 2 bin Türk askeri, *Hürriyet*, 6 December 2015, [online](#); Bakan Akar Irak'ın kuzeyindeki üç bölgesini ilk kez ziyaret etti, *TRT Haber*, 2 May 2021, [online](#); TRT Haber, 11 April 2021, [online](#); Sezer, Kıymet, En stratejik üç Metina'ya, *Yeni Şafak*, 6 May 2021, [online](#). CNN Turk, 24 March 2021, [online](#), *Habertürk*, 7 June 2018, [online](#).

legitimate political entities, however. The Turkish military had already established six military bases in northern Iraq in the wake of its assistance to the KDP against the PKK during the Kurdish Civil War of the mid-1990s, which was in part triggered by Iran's shift to assist the PUK.⁷ During the early 2000s, the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) instead pursued a foreign policy encapsulated by the catchphrase 'zero problems with neighbours'.

It downplayed Ankara's military focus of the 1980s and 1990s and opened a new chapter of economic relations with and political recognition of the KRI. As Ankara was gradually excluded from Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, its engagement focused mostly on Erbil.

After the US withdrawal in 2010/11, Shi'a dominance of the national government in Baghdad prevented a shift in relations from Ankara-Erbil to Ankara-Baghdad as Prime Minister Al-Maliki rebuffed Turkey's overtures in objection to its self-ascribed guarantor role for Iraq's Turkmen and Sunni. Sticking with one another, Erbil and Ankara subsequently increased the export of KRI-origin oil to world markets via Turkey after

7 Öğür, Berkan, Baykal, Zana and Balcı, Ali, *Kuzey Irak-Türkiye İlişkileri: PKK, Güvenlik ve İşbirliği*, Ankara: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2014/01; TSK'nın Kuzey Irak'ta 6 üssü var, *CNN Türk*, 22 February 2008, [online](#) (accessed 17 September 2021).

2009 and opened a Turkish consulate in Erbil in 2010. A rather secretive 50-year-long energy deal (extendable) became a core component of the relationship between Turkey and the KDP in 2014,⁸ to the dissatisfaction of both the PUK and Baghdad.⁹ Ankara's peace process with the PKK also facilitated positive political and economic engagement with the KRI well into the 2010s. Ankara's primary interlocutors in the KRI were the KDP as well as Sunni Turkmen in Kirkuk and Nineveh Province.

The Ankara-Erbil relationship acquired a greater focus on security matters when the rise of Islamic State (IS) provided the PKK with an opportunity to branch out into Sinjar, the PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG) expanded in Syria, and the Turkish-PKK 'peace process' failed (2015/2016). Even though Turkey had initially been deaf to KRG pleas for support against IS, limiting PKK influence was a shared interest for the KDP and Ankara. President Erdoğan's newly-brokered alliance with Turkey's right-wing nationalists (MHP) after the June 2015 elections also accelerated Turkey's security focus. A changing security environment combined with a reassertion of its security-focused mindset led Ankara to enact a forward military strategy that essentially regionalised Turkey's fight against Kurdish forces across Iraq and Syria. It is based on a permanent military presence and large-scale operations in both countries.¹⁰ Turkey's operations in Iraq were modelled on Ankara's various interventions in Syria after 2016, which established 'safe zones' that are effectively under Turkish control.

At the same time, the economic, trade and energy relations that developed between Turkey and the KRI after the mid-2000s

continued to tie the KDP to Ankara and prevent Erbil from taking a stance regarding Turkey's fight with the PKK in Iraq, even had it wanted to.¹¹ In fact, Turkey used these relations to incentivise the KDP to confront the PKK directly, but this proved a bridge too far for the KDP due to popular dissatisfaction with its rule in the KRI and the risk of drawing the PUK, Iran or even Baghdad into the confrontation. When the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum illustrated the limits of Turkey's influence on the KDP, and temporarily set their relationship back, Ankara brought its case to Baghdad instead and pressed for greater intelligence sharing, defence cooperation and joint operations against the PKK. So far this has been unsuccessful despite Turkey's emphasis on the advantages it could bring, such as a second oil pipeline¹² and support for the reconstruction of Mosul.¹³

These developments also need to be considered in the context of growing rivalry between Turkey and Iran in Iraq, in the wake of gradual US withdrawal since 2017. It appears that Ankara would like to see a strong central state, ideally led by Sunni but certainly not tolerant of the PKK's presence. Tehran is assumed to prefer neither a weak nor a strong Iraq, but an in-between-option under Shia leadership. In this light, Tehran

8 See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-krp-agree-50-year-energy-deal/153832> (accessed 10 December 2021); also: Confidential interview with a Kurdish interlocutor by one of the authors.

9 See: <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/qa-puk-co-president-lahur-talabany-43583/> (accessed 10 December 2021).

10 Van Veen, Erwin and Yüksel, Engin, *Too big for its boots: Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East*, The Hague: Clingendael, July 2018.

11 According to former Turkish Ambassador to Iraq Fatih Yildiz: "Turkish-Iraqi trade volume of 2020 has been recorded well over the target of USD 20 billion, to be exact USD 20.666. Iraq is Turkey's 4th export destination, whereas Iraq ranks in the 5th place among Turkey's importers". See: https://twitter.com/FATIHILDIZ_MFA/status/1358507462253510664. The Turkish Foreign Ministry in turn reported: "Our bilateral trade volume in 2020 amounted to 17.33 billion US dollars. Iraq became third largest export market for our country (USD 9.13 billion) in 2020". See: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-iraq.en.mfa> (both accessed 15 December 2021). Note that these figures refer to Iraq as a whole.

12 Daily Sabah, 5 September 2019, [online](#) (accessed 27 February 2022).

13 Note that historically Baghdad never controlled Iraq's north, including the Qandil mountains, which came under various Kurdish forces. Baghdad does not view the PKK as a threat to its sovereignty.

takes an unfavourable view of Ankara's military and economic power projection into Iraq, especially in areas such as Sinjar, Bashiqa, Kirkuk, Mosul and Sulaymaniyah. In particular, the indirect connection between Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, partially affiliated with Iran) and the PKK via the Sinjar-based YBS (part of the PMF and linked with the PKK) represents a point of contention.¹⁴ Both countries seek to gain advantage in Baghdad to advance their agenda. Iran does so by supporting the Shia Coordination Framework (SCF) and putting pressure on the KDP (consider Ismael Qaani's recent visit to Erbil). Turkey does so by favouring Sadr – since this weakens the SCF – as well as the KDP, and helping to reconcile Khanjar and Halbousi as leading Iraqi Sunni politicians. Despite their rivalry, Ankara and Tehran also have common interests, such as a desire to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdistan.

Two strategic issues deserve a more detailed unpacking. First, over the past decade the KRG leveraged its blossoming relationship with Turkey to manage its tense relationship with Baghdad to advantage. It is through its oil exports, trade and investment with Ankara that the KRG can maintain its relative independence in semi-federal Iraq, even though it remains vulnerable in its recurrent budget negotiations with Baghdad as it needs the associated funds. However, resolution of the Baghdad-Erbil budgetary issues would likely upend the KRG's oil exports to Turkey. In brief, improvement of one relationship comes at the expense of another.¹⁵ For now, the KDP prioritises its relationship with Turkey, but the price it pays for the privilege is having to enable Turkey's fight with the PKK on Iraqi (Kurdish)

soil. In a sense, however, the KDP has little choice because the federal structure of Iraq remains unfinished business as long as the KRI forms its only part. This situation invites cooperation and competition on a balance-of-power basis, amplified by Kurdish desires for independence, rather than enabling stable federal governance based on a clear and settled legal and financial framework.

Second, the KDP walks a slackening geopolitical tightrope. On the one hand, it looks with some ambivalence at Turkish incursions. After all, the PKK shares a common 'Kurdish-ness' and a desire for more pan-Kurdish autonomy with the KDP, even though the PKK's leftist, anti-feudal and bottom-up empowerment doctrines contrast with the KDP's more conservative, nationalist and clientelist-oriented views. On the other hand, the reduction of the US military footprint and unresolved nuclear standoff between the US and Iran also create a need for the KDP to improve its relationship with Iran. For the moment, it is clear that the KDP puts greater value on the benefits of its relationship with Ankara.¹⁶ The net result is a policy of silence in which the Turkish presence in the KRI is largely ignored and other Kurdish parties are pressurised to follow suit. While it appears stable, the present situation does create a number of medium-term strategic risks with regard to conflict escalation across northern Iraq.

- Further encroachment of Turkish military forces into northern Iraq is likely to push the PKK deeper into the southern parts of the KRI, Sinjar and the more densely populated disputed territories where the KDP and PUK exercise greater control. This risks increasing tensions between these three parties. While Ankara might view this as positive, such a development would be negative from the perspective of the governability of Iraq as well as the efficacy of the fight against IS, which is also a stated US interest.

14 Yılmaz, Arzu, *What will happen to the Kurds if the US withdraws from Syria and Iraq?*, EU Turkey Civic Commission, October 2021.

15 The recent ruling of Iraq's Federal Supreme Court that judged the 2007 KRG oil/gas law, independent oil exports and all contracts linked to it unconstitutional may yet force the KRG's hand. But the forceful reaction of the prime minister of the KRI, Masrour Barzani, does not suggest it intends to comply for the time being: https://twitter.com/masrour_barzani/status/1499305808517074946 (accessed 4 March 2022).

16 Such benefits are both material and immaterial. The latter result from Turkey empowering the KDP vis-à-vis other actors in the region through positive media coverage and greater political capital in Erbil's relationship with Baghdad.

- Deeper Turkish relations with Iraqi Sunni power brokers (such as traditionally the Mosul-based Nujafi's and more recently Halbousi and Al-Khanjar), or with Nineveh/Kirkuk-based Iraqi Turkmen groups¹⁷ are likely to increase tensions between Ankara, Baghdad and Iran. This is because any Turkish designs to establish some sort of zone of soft influence extending from Turkey to Mosul and into Sunni/Turkmen inhabited areas of the Nineveh Plains (reminiscent of the Ottoman sanjak of Mosul) will threaten Sinjar as strategic transition point from Syria into Iraq and the Hashd-al-Sha'abi presence in the Nineveh Plains. It also risks making the KDP more of a target for Iran-linked armed groups that will make sustaining the KDP's relationship with Turkey more difficult.
- Further Turkish intrusion into the KRI will also see the KRG – the KDP in particular – becoming increasingly stuck between Turkish objectives and Kurdish public opinion. The KDP will also consider the fact that it is the weaker party in the Turkish-KDP relationship that in itself is subject to sudden reversals, as for example evidenced by Ankara's refusal to aid Erbil militarily when it came under threat from IS in 2014, even though it already had forces stationed in the KRI (alternatively, one can consider Turkey's stance on the 2017 referendum¹⁸).

17 Stein, Aron, *Turkey Deepens Its Presence in Nineveh*, Washington: Atlantic Council, December 2015; Ghareeb, A. Makram, Irak Türkmen Cephesi'nin yeni Başkanı Turan: Türkmenler Irak'ın toprak bütünlüğünü savunmaktan taviz vermeyecek, *Anadolu Ajansı*, 30 March 2021, [online](#).

18 The KDP leadership expected rhetorical pushback, but not a Turkish military build-up along its border, joint exercises with Iraqi forces or the closure of Turkish airspace to flights originating from the KRG. It became clear in the aftermath of the referendum that Turkey had played a substantial role in its outcome. See: Reuters, 26 September 2017, [online](#); Al-Monitor, 29 September 2017, [online](#) (both accessed on 10 December 2021).

3 The means of Turkey's interventions

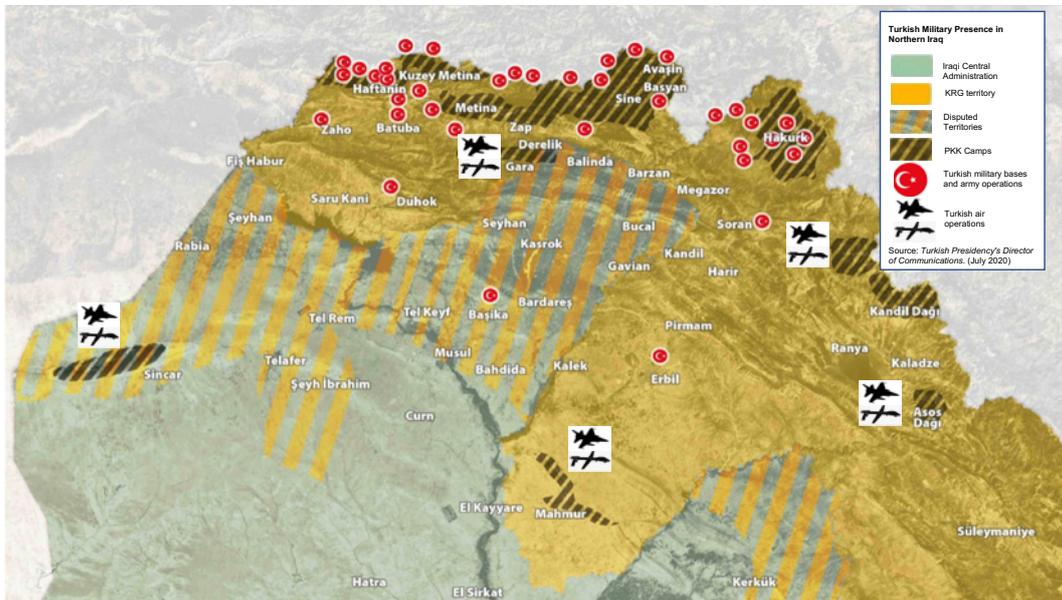
To achieve its objectives, since mid-2018 Ankara has relied primarily on a series of military operations in northern Iraq. These include Operation Resolve (August 2018–May 2019), Operation Claw (May 2019–June 2020) and Operations Claw-Tiger, Claw-Eagle and Claw-Thunder (June 2020 to the present). While these operations do not have the brand recognition of Turkish operations in Syria (Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring and Spring Shield), both sets originate in the Turkish Armed Force's concept of 'area control' inspired by US military doctrine of the 1960s.¹⁹ In the case of Iraq, they intend to limit the PKK's freedom of manoeuvre by establishing a network of military bases that also act as launch paths for search-and-destroy operations by mobile ground forces and aerial units. After mid-2018, this concept was scaled up significantly to cover a strip of Iraqi territory along the Iraqi/Turkish border. From Ankara's perspective, part of the KRI's territory has become a Turkish counter-terrorism buffer zone.

Specifically, operation Claw-Tiger focused on areas adjacent to the Iraqi-Syrian border and unfolded largely in the Metina and Sinat-Haftanin regions, using air-deployable light infantry and gendarmerie troops that were deployed in Sikorsky S-70 and CH-47 Chinook helicopters; air force combat elements such as Turkish F-16s, Bayraktar TB2 and Anka drones, as well as T129 and AH-1W Super-Cobra attack helicopters; and Firtina howitzers and multiple rocket launchers.²⁰ In turn, operations Claw-Eagle and Claw-Thunder focused mostly on neutralising PKK elements in areas where Turkish ground forces have less purchase – the Sinjar, Karacak, Qandil, Zap, Avaşın Basyan, Hakurk and Makhmour

19 Doughty Robert A., *The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-1976*, Ohio State University, August 1979, [online](#).

20 Pençe-Kaplan Operasyonu'nun ayrıntıları belli oldu, *TRT Haber*, 17 June 2020, [online](#). (accessed 19 July 2021).

Figure 1 An overview of Turkey’s military presence in northern Iraq in January 2022



Source: The original map is from the Turkish Presidency’s Director of Communications and dates from July 2020. It was updated by the authors in January 2022.

regions. They deployed similar military assets but were more ‘intelligence-focused operations’, i.e. consisting of the rapid, targeted and temporary insertion of mobile units supported by heavy fire power.²¹ Such an operating method was enabled by reconnaissance drones and the use of Turkish National Intelligence Operatives, as well as AWACS and air-to-air refuelling assets that increased the longevity of operations.²²

On balance, since mid-2018, the Turkish military has deployed more sophisticated combat assets, more technology and better intelligence against the PKK than during preceding periods. Continued drone- and airstrikes have managed to force the PKK into a more defensive posture and reduced its manoeuvrability. At the same time, ground operations have achieved a

measure of territorial control in northern Iraq. These military activities take place without notification to – let alone formal agreement with – authorities in Erbil or Baghdad.²³ So far, Turkish operations have not been hindered by the US because they help to limit Iranian influence, which is of greater concern to Washington. In this sense, one can argue that the US discretely supports Turkey’s military operations.²⁴

Turkey has also increased its pressure on the KRG to deploy its military forces against the PKK. But it remains unlikely that KDP Peshmerga will support Turkish military operations at the frontlines. The explanatory background frame is the experience of the Kurdish civil war in the 1990s. In many closed-door meetings, Masoud Barzani is alleged to have said that his party will not initiate another Kurdish-Kurdish war and will only use arms in defence. Most observers view such statements as genuine and not just reflecting nationalist rhetoric. In addition, a range of practical factors mitigate against

21 Aslan, Murat and Tetik, Umit, *5 Soru: Pençe-Kartal Harekatı: İstihbarat Odaklı Derin Harekat*, Ankara: SETA, 15 June 2020, [online](#) (accessed 23 July 2021).

22 SON DAKİKA: MIT’ten Kuzey Irak’ta operasyon! Kırmızı bültenle aranan Ulaş Doğan etkisiz hale getirildi, *CNN Türk*, 22 June 2021, [online](#) (accessed 28 June 2021); Ergun, Ugur, PKK’ya Kuzey Irak’ta ‘Pençe-Kartal’, *Hürriyet*, 16 June 2020, [online](#) (accessed 21 July 2021).

23 Cupolo, Diego, Turkish attack near Makhmour camp extends anti-PKK operations deeper into Iraq, *Al-Monitor*, 7 June 2021, [online](#) (accessed 27 June 2021).

24 Yılmaz (2021), *op. cit.*

Peshmerga forces taking on those of the PKK including:

- Many Peshmerga are unwilling to fight such a war
- Kurdish society rejects such a move wholesale
- The KRG can hardly afford another front in addition to increasing attacks by Iran-linked PMF forces as well as those of Islamic State (in the disputed territories)
- International support for the Peshmerga might be reduced or terminated

Instead, Turkey has asked the KDP to encircle PKK basing areas as Turkish operations move forward, provide logistical support to Ankara's operational bases, disrupt PKK supply lines, and provide intelligence.²⁵ Providing such support in rear areas represents a lower risk to KDP Peshmerga forces. Either way, KDP-PKK tensions are growing, and their rhetoric is becoming more adversarial. As a result, sporadic exchanges of fire, (violent) clashes, and occasional casualties can be expected to continue, as for example in Bekhma village in July 2021.²⁶

In addition to asking for direct military support against the PKK, Turkey has two further operational requests to make of Erbil and Baghdad. To start with, Ankara would like to construct a motorway and railway line from Ovakoy in Turkey to Baghdad. This would skirt Iraqi Kurdistan, separate the Qamishli area in Syria from the Duhok area in Iraq, and thus hinder PKK movement. It would also increase Turkish access to Mosul.²⁷ Moreover, Ankara has

asked Baghdad and Erbil several times to form a tripartite institutional mechanism to cooperate in the fight against the PKK, for example through intelligence sharing and joint operations in strategic areas such as Sinjar.²⁸ In part, these requests are driven by the Turkish perception that Sinjar is turning into a second main base for the PKK, next to Qandil, after the PKK protected the area against the IS onslaught of 2014. So far, these wishes have fallen on polite but deaf ears in both Erbil and Baghdad.

4 The results of Turkey's interventions in northern Iraq

Turkish incursions in northern Iraq have produced different results in the military, political and social spheres. Before discussing these in greater detail, it is useful to examine the broader context in which Turkish incursions make their mark. Iraq sits in a tight corner at the moment. To begin with, as long as the US-Iran nuclear issue remains unresolved, Iraq remains a critical economic outlet for Tehran, as well as a crucial part of its defensive platform in case of a regional conflict with Israel, the US, or both. As a result, Iraqi politics are currently highly securitised by its biggest neighbour. Such an observation does not intend to downplay the intra-elite competition, poor governance practices and dissent that are the core problems of the Iraqi state, but it certainly makes addressing them more difficult. The relevance to Turkish incursions in the north is that if they extend much further, they risk being perceived by Iran as jeopardising the utility and integrity of Iraq as a platform against US pressure and interference. This is bound to trigger a response at some point.

Moreover, Iraq is facing strong socio-economic headwinds due to the Covid-19 pandemic, volatile oil prices, faltering

25 Acun, C., *PKK'nın Peşmerge'ye Saldırması Ne Anlama Geliyor?*, SETA, 12 June 2021, [online](#) (accessed 7 September 2021). For example by setting up bases in places like Sidekan (northeast of Erbil). See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/14/fighting-intensifies-between-peshmerga-and-pkk-in-northern-iraq>, 14 December 2020.

26 See: <https://rojnews.news/كوردستان/قهره سوو-جه قو-گه ريشتوو ده ته-سه ر-ئيسقان-و-ئ> (accessed 19 December 2021).

27 Taştekin, F., *What Erdogan missed in skipping Baghdad conference*, Al-Monitor, 2 September 2021 (accessed 8 September 2021).

28 Bakan Akar: Terörle mücadelede Erbil işbirliğiyle çok önemli gelişmeler olacak, *TRT Haber*, 20 January 2021, [online](#) (accessed 27 July 2021).

governance and climate change. For example, the World Bank's Iraq Economic Monitor estimates that the country suffered a GDP contraction of over 10 per cent in 2020.²⁹ Combined with rentierism, a state-centric economy and high levels of corruption, this indicates that Iraq's population faces deteriorating living standards, while Iraqi political elites are confronted with mounting popular pressure to govern better. The relevance to Turkish incursions in the north is that the KDP and PUK will be increasingly dependent on Turkey (oil revenue, cross-border trade, and investment) and/or Baghdad (budget transfers) to make ends meet in a manner that can sustain their hold on power.

Finally, dissatisfaction with Iraq's ruling elites continues to mount and has hit the KRI with a vengeance. The region enjoyed a long economic boom that, to a certain extent, masqueraded the self-enrichment of its elites as 'a rising tide lifts all boats'. But now that the good days are over, the privileged position of KDP and PUK affiliates and grandees, especially the extended Barzani and Talabani families, has become both more visible and more exposed.³⁰ Sustained protests in Sulaymaniyah and, to a lesser extent in Duhok and Erbil (due to greater repression), have driven home to the region's elites that the KRI's economy is reaching a dead end. Its main method of employment generation – putting new entrants into the labour market on the public payroll – is no longer sustainable but generating more private sector employment requires liberalisation that will reduce elite economic dominance. The likely short-term consequences of this deadlock will be more protests, migration and some concessions.

The effect of these three factors – Iranian influence, economic trouble and popular grievances – is that whatever the impact of Turkish incursions, the ability of the KDP and PUK to respond is limited. They do not have much political or economic space for geopolitical manoeuvring and neither do they have popular legitimacy to ask for social sacrifices. A side-effect of this state of affairs is that younger generations of Iraqi Kurds, who no longer share in the windfall of the KRI economy as it is in crisis, are coming to view the PKK in a more heroic light. Other factors contributing to this development include a growing sense of shared 'Kurdish-ness', a greater general awareness of what transpires across Kurdish areas due to social media connectivity, and a realisation of Turkey's hostile stance towards the Kurds in Turkey itself, Syria and Iraq. To paraphrase a KRG source: 'people see the PKK as austere, fighting for a cause and under constant pressure, which stands in stark contrast to seeing KRG officials in suits, golden chairs and expensive cars.'³¹

Military impact

A key objective of the Turkish military is to prevent PKK fighters from infiltrating Turkey and attacking Turkish security forces.³² With regard to this point, Turkey's operations in Iraq appear to be rather effective. ACLED data suggest a considerable decrease (about 40%) in such attacks in 2020 compared with 2019.³³ The PKK to Turkish state security forces fatality ratio has also increased from 3.46:1 in July 2018 to 4.44:1 in July 2021.³⁴ In brief, moving Turkey's military frontier into Iraq has forced a shift in the PKK's focus from the Turkish homeland into northern Iraq.³⁵

29 World Bank, *Iraq Economic Monitor: Seizing the Opportunity for Reforms and Managing Volatility*, Washington: World Bank, Spring 2021, [online](#).

30 See for example the Twitter discussion around this post: https://twitter.com/Matthew_Barber/status/1469008849462075397 (accessed 19 December 2021).

31 Quoted in: Zaman, A., *Turkey's anti-PKK assault leaves Kurds more divided*, Al-Monitor, 6 July 2021.

32 Süleyman Soylu: Metina bölgesine üs kuracağız, *Duvar*, 30 April 2021, [online](#) (accessed 21 June 2021).

33 According to ACLED Data, the number of PKK attacks in Turkey decreased from 278 in 2019 to 164 in 2020. See: ACLED, [online](#) (accessed 21 July 2021).

34 Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer, *International Crisis Group*, 8 June 2021, [online](#).

35 Violent Attacks in Iraq, June 2021, see: <https://twitter.com/ErwinVeen/status/1420685694100455424> (accessed 19 December 2021).

On another key objective of the Turkish military – full defeat of the PKK in its heartland of the Qandil mountain range – success has been more elusive.³⁶ Premised on establishing territorial control as a means to reduce PKK fighting capabilities, this approach was reasonably successful in Turkey itself in the 1990s. However, intervening variables in Iraq include more difficult terrain, the absence of proxy forces to join the Turkish military (on the KDP conundrum, see above) and tribal resistance in the border areas.³⁷ Moreover, Turkish incursions are military only and do not address the ideological drivers or historical grievances of Kurdish population groups across the region, let alone in Turkey. In part, as a result, greater pressure on the PKK has the side effect of increasing popular sympathy for the group in Iraqi Kurdistan.³⁸

In essence, Turkey pursues a political objective – the neutering of Kurdish aspirations for greater autonomy as a significant minority – by military means on the premise that elimination of the territorial bases of militant Kurdish groups, especially the PKK, will do the job. In this logic, Qandil, Sinjar and Qamishli (Syria) are core military targets after an earlier focus on, for example, southeast Turkey and Afrin (Syria).

Political impact

The political impact of Turkey's incursions into Iraqi Kurdistan is a double-edged sword in the sense that there is both a Turkish and an Iraqi Kurdish dimension to it. In part, this is because the KRI has become an entity that is both internal and external to Turkey at the same time. On the one hand, the KRI and Turkey are intimately connected by

transnational ties of Kurdish identity and community, even though varied in texture and intensity, with the effect that Turkish domestic politics vis-à-vis its Kurds directly affects the KRG. In reverse, the KDP has also attempted to nurture and support politicians and small Kurdish parties in Turkey to create an alternative to the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and PKK – Barzani canvassing votes with Erdogan used to be a fairly common sight – but this was not successful. In fact, one might argue that cross-border Kurdish-ness is enjoying a resurgence – despite the failed 2017 referendum – due to the rise of the YPG/PYD in Syria, Turkish incursions into Iraq, and growing popular dissatisfaction with the KDP. On the other hand, the KRI is also external to Turkey since it is technically a federal part of another country to which international arrangements of sovereignty and domestic arrangements of subsidiarity apply. Due to the peculiar position and weakness of the Iraqi state, this distinction does not currently have much practical meaning, but it is a *de jure* factor that could easily acquire greater practical relevance.

On the Turkish side of the ledger, Turkey's interventions in northern Iraq and its broader security-focused Kurdish policy have become essential to continued AKP rule since it is a core precondition of the nationalist-conservative MHP to maintain its alliance with the AKP. Moreover, the establishment of buffer zones in Syria and Iraq under Turkish military control and administered by Turkish auxiliaries or proxies has been a policy objective among AKP elites since the Arab Uprisings.³⁹ In other words, a strong Turkish military performance in northern Iraq allows the AKP-MHP to claim credit for domestic calm and security, and to project the image of working towards a solution to Turkey's 'Kurdish problem' (one of a unilateral and military variety to be precise). More generally, the Kurdish issue has, until recently, been an important unifier in otherwise rather volatile Turkish domestic

36 Erdoğan'dan Kuzey Irak'taki harekâta ilişkin açıklama, *Birgün*, 24 April 2021, [online](#) (accessed 15 September 2021).

37 A number of these tribes, in particular the Baradust, are not linked with Barzani's KDP. They resent the destruction and social disruption wreaked by Turkish strikes / presence even though these are tolerated by the KDP.

38 See also: Van Veen, E., Yüksel, E. and Tekineş, H., *Waiting for blowback: The Kurdish question and Turkey's new regional militarism*, The Hague, Clingendael, September 2020, pp. 8-9.

39 Çandar, Cengiz, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: Turkey's War and Peace with the Kurds*, London: Lexington Books, 2020.

politics, i.e. a useful ‘external’ threat around which the Turkish political spectrum can be rallied, based on a securitisation logic (with the recent exception of the Republican People’s Party (CHP)’s position, which has been shifting towards a more positive approach over the past few years).

Such views are being taken to their logical conclusion by current efforts to criminalise the HDP in Turkey itself. The leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, argued in February 2021 that military success in northern Iraq and Syria should be translated into political success by closing the HDP.⁴⁰ Turkey’s constitutional court accepted the admissibility of an indictment to this effect in June 2021 on the grounds that the HDP could be undemocratic and collude with the PKK. The case is proceeding.⁴¹ Otherwise put, Ankara’s strategy is not to advance a political solution to its Kurdish issue based on its relative military success, but to complement military repression with its political cousin.⁴² Turkish interventions in northern Iraq therefore serve President Erdoğan, the AKP and MHP well in terms of maintaining their national/conservative base as well as cementing their alliance.

On the KDP side of the ledger, the political impact of Turkey’s military incursions is that they bring it into an increasingly tight spot between its inability to push back, popular domestic protest and grievance against its rule, and growing PKK popularity. In consequence, a KRG delegation recently visited Tehran, in part to improve ties that can act as a counterweight.⁴³ Developing a more stable and positive relationship

with Baghdad does not yet seem to be on the cards but might follow in the medium term as its challenges mount. Both Tehran and Baghdad might back their interests with action sooner than anticipated if and when Turkish incursions ‘trespass’ beyond the boundaries of the KRI, for example by engaging its constituencies – Turkmens and political Islamists – in Mosul and Kirkuk more strongly. While being in between powerful neighbours is nothing new to Kurdish movements and parties, usually offering both opportunities and restrictions, the space for manoeuvre in Iraq is narrowing at the moment.⁴⁴

The impact of Turkey’s incursions in terms of the ‘war of narratives’ is that Ankara has doubled down on the ‘war against PKK terrorism’ script in which the end justifies the means regarding the violation of Iraqi sovereignty and substantially damaging the property and lives of the inhabitants of northern Iraq; the KDP now frames the PKK as the accused for dragging Turkey into northern Iraq⁴⁵ (despite the KDP’s own past support and tolerance of the PKK’s presence); and the PKK is once more acting on the premise that taking its armed struggle into Turkey is the only viable route to greater Kurdish autonomy.

Social impact

Even though the areas directly adjacent to the Turkish–Iraqi border are sparsely populated, the southwards expansion of Turkish operations is having a growing and negative impact on the lives of their Iraqi (Kurdish) inhabitants. According to Human Rights Watch and other reports, Turkish drone and artillery attacks claim a growing number of civilian lives, destroy civilian livestock as well as property, and oblige villagers to vacate entire areas.⁴⁶ It is

40 Bahçeli’den çok sert sözler: HDP zaman kaybetmeden kapatılmalıdır, *Hürriyet*, 16 February 2021, [online](#) (accessed 6 January 2021).

41 Turkey’s Constitutional Court accepts HDP closure indictment, Daily Sabah, 21 June 2021, [online](#); see also: <https://www.dw.com/tr/hdpnin-kapatilmasi-davasinda-yeni-gelisme/a-59970367> (accessed 6 January 2022).

42 Bozarlan, Felat, Erdoğan’ın Diyarbakır ziyareti oyları geri getirecek mi?, *DW Turkish*, 9 July 2021, [online](#) (accessed 8 September 2021).

43 See for instance: <https://presidency.gov.krd/en/president-nechirvan-barzani-to-visit-iran/> (accessed 19 December 2021).

44 Boris, J., *The Rise and Fall of the Kurdish Emirates*, in: Bozarlan, Gunes and Yadirgi, *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*, Cambridge: CUP, 2021.

45 PKK is dragging Turkey further into northern Iraq – ex-commander, *Ahval News*, 11 May 2021, [online](#), (accessed 27 July 2021).

46 Iraq: Turkish Airstrike Disregards Civilian Loss: Ankara Should Investigate Attacks Harming Civilians, Compensate Victims, *Human Rights Watch*, 22 July 2020, [online](#) (29 July 2021)

clear that Turkish operations have adversely influenced social life in those areas, even though its *de facto* military occupation adds the responsibility of ensuring public order and safety to Ankara's tasks. As a recent report by Christian Peacemakers Teams states: "While Turkey claims to target the PKK in Operation Claw-Lightning, the reality is that civilians living in the border regions are most critically impacted by Turkey's bombings. These bombardments have devastated the region where hundreds of families live. Thousands of dunams of land and approximately 1,300 beehives have been destroyed, all of which are crucial resources for families. Turkey's bombings not only threaten the livelihood of families, but also their lives."⁴⁷ Turkey's interventions also engender a sense of powerlessness and humility among local populations, especially since they cannot count on their own authorities to protect them.

As a result, it appears that a majority of Iraqi Kurdish inhabitants reject Turkey's military presence and operations.⁴⁸ But there is also a minority that echoes the KDP discourse that the PKK should take its fight into Turkey instead of conducting it on Iraqi soil. This narrative is based on the premise that Turkey entered the region to fight the PKK and therefore, once there is no PKK (or affiliates) to fight, Turkey will withdraw.

5 Conclusion

The preceding analysis has illustrated how Turkish incursions into the KRI represent an element of its securitised and militarised approach against Kurdish elements considered hostile to Turkey, replicate the logic of a number of its interventions in Syria, and extend Turkish domestic politics into

Iraq. It also showed how these incursions put the KDP, and to a lesser extent the PUK, in an increasingly difficult spot that will likely only get tighter. Finally, the preceding analysis suggests that tensions between Ankara, Tehran and Baghdad will probably increase if Turkey's military presence and incursions expand beyond KDP heartlands into areas such as Sinjar, Makmur, Sulaymaniyah or even Kirkuk.

Ideally, the EU would encourage Ankara to resolve its own Kurdish question domestically by re-engaging representative Kurdish parties and working towards a political solution.⁴⁹ Tensions and conflict in the KRI would subside as a result. Yet, due to the poor high-level political relationship between the EU/Netherlands and Turkey, the unwillingness of most EU-countries to make an issue out of Ankara's approach to its Kurdish question and the current AKP/MHP parliamentary majority, such an approach is difficult. Iraq in fact offers a more feasible entry point at present for European policies and interventions that can help to limit the risk of further conflict in the KRI. The following diplomatic initiatives should be considered on the basis of the analysis provided in this brief:

Support resolution of the status of the disputed territories via a process negotiated between Erbil and Baghdad that puts the wishes of local populations centre stage. UNAMI ought to act as a steward in this process with regard to Iraq's international obligations and the process should also be acceptable to Tehran. As the disputed territories make the difference between Turkish incursions that only affect the KRI and Turkish incursions that affect both Iraq and regional conflict dynamics, resolving their status and stabilising their governance will prevent the area from serving as conflict zone (or worse, catalyst). At the moment, it serves as playground for a range of different power brokers that use fear, fragmentation and competition to their own advantage.

47 Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) (2021), *No Return: The Civilian Impact of Turkey's Operation Claw-Lightning*, [online](#) (accessed 19 December 2021).

48 While survey data on this issue are not available, the nature/tone of Kurdish media reporting, the intensity/tone of social media and intellectual discourse in the KRI, as well as the positions of all Kurdish political parties provide sufficiently strong indicators for such a statement.

49 See: Van Veen, E., *How is Turkey answering its 'Kurdish question'?*, Open Democracy, 11 March 2021, [online](#).

Extend professionalisation efforts of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to the Iraqi/Kurdish border via either UNAMI, the NATO Mission in Iraq or the EU's civilian Security Sector Reform (SSR) mission. If the ISF were able to assure adequate border security on the Iraqi/Turkish frontier, backed by political support from Baghdad (and ideally from Ankara), both the Turkish military presence in Iraq and PKK incursions into Turkey could be rendered more difficult with a positive net effect on the number of violent incidents. However, none of these actors are currently well positioned. UNAMI hardly has an effective SSR presence in Iraq while the EU mission is focused on Baghdad. Turkey's recent move to support the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) with a team of advisers is unlikely to increase the mission's ability to work on border security in the north. It must also be considered that the NMI's mandate is centred on IS. Nevertheless, Turkey's contribution might enable greater NMI support for the ISF in the disputed territories, for example, as this can create a win-win situation for all parties involved. On balance, UNAMI is the most suitable actor to work on border security, but it would require European advocacy in New York and sustained support for the mission in Iraq itself.

Begin a dialogue on security forces integration between Peshmerga and ISF. A dialogue could be built on the back of existing British, American, German and Dutch support for intra-Peshmerga integration⁵⁰ that aims to bring part of the Peshmerga under greater command and control of the ISF. Such a move could lessen KDP dependence on Turkey regarding the role of the Peshmerga in relation to the PKK and, if combined with the initiative outlined above, improve border security. If it is incentivised by greater agreement on budget transfers to Erbil, or direct Peshmerga salary payments by Baghdad, it can also be of interest to the KRG.

50 Rudaw, 16 December 2021, online; also: <https://twitter.com/BaxtiyarGoran/status/1471792240674709506> (both accessed 19 December 2021).

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www.clingendael.org/cru
cru@clingendael.org
+31 70 324 53 84

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About the authors

Sardar Aziz is a columnist in Iraqi Kurdistan who used to be a senior adviser to the Kurdistan Parliament of Iraq. His areas of interests are the Iraqi state, Iran and Turkey as regional powers, Chinese and US interventions in Iraq as well as the civil-military relationship. He worked extensively with think tanks in Europe, the Middle East as well as the United States. Sardar earned his PhD from the University College Cork (Ireland).

Erwin van Veen is a senior research fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit where he leads a team that analyses the political economy of conflict in the Middle East. His own work examines the political use of armed groups in processes of state development and geopolitical conflict.

Engin Yüksel is a research associate at Clingendael's Security Unit who focuses on Russia's military posture, doctrine and threats. He is also a PhD candidate at the University of Leiden where he examines Russia's historical and contemporary approaches to warfare.